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U.S. Data Said to Conclude Soviet Mistook Korean Plane

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 22 — The South Korean airliner shot down by the Soviet Air Force in 1983 was not on an espionage mission, but the Russians, in a series of blunders, believed they were attacking an American reconnaissance flight, according to a magazine article.

The article, which will be published next month in *The Atlantic Monthly*, is based on a review of American intelligence data and on interviews with Soviet officials. It concludes that the plane penetrated Soviet airspace because of navigational errors by the Korean Air Lines crew and not, as the Soviet Union contended, because it was on an espionage mission.

U.S. Intelligence Data Used

The evidence gathered by American intelligence, which has not been made public, also contradicts the United States' initial contention that the Soviet Union had knowingly shot down the civilian airliner, killing the 269 people aboard.

The article is drawn from a new book by Seymour M. Hersh, a journalist who has reported for *The New York Times* on corruption in Panama and on intelligence topics and who uncovered the My Lai massacre in Vietnam for an independent news agency.

Mr. Hersh investigated the South Korean airliner incident for two years and was invited to the Soviet Union in May 1984 for interviews with high officials, including Marshal Nikolai V. Ogarkov, then Chief of the General Staff, and Georgi M. Korniyenko, then a First

Deputy Foreign Minister.

The Soviet officials told Mr. Hersh that they were giving him the Soviet side of the story in the hope that he would also investigate what they contended was a Central Intelligence Agency role in the matter.

The question of what happened to the airliner has been a matter of dispute in the press and in books. Some accounts contend that the plane was part of an intelligence operation since it flew over sensitive Soviet installations.

According to the *Atlantic* article, American listening posts intercepted the initial Soviet communications related to the airliner's intrusion, but the information was not analyzed until hours later, when it was too late to warn the plane.

The intercepted information reportedly showed that Soviet radar operators had confused the airliner with an American plane on an electronic surveillance mission, that Soviet jet fighters were unable to find the airliner during the first of two penetrations of Soviet airspace and that the fighter that fired the fatal missiles did not follow orders to make a visual identification before attacking.

A Reason for Confusion

The article quotes intelligence officials as saying that some of the confusion was understandable in view of the heavy traffic of American military reconnaissance flights in the area.

The information intercepted by the United States is said to include recordings of phone calls by Soviet military officials and videotapes of Soviet radar screens.

The article says that the National Security Agency, which has responsibility for intercepting communications, recorded a conversation in which a Soviet military official on the Pacific coast called Moscow over an open telephone line to ask about shooting down an American military intruder.

"He was obviously under pressure to get a decision," the article quotes an analyst as saying. "He was not going to shoot down an American aircraft without getting some authorization from higher headquarters."

After the incident, the United States accused the Soviet Union of having deliberately attacked a civilian plane. President Reagan said in a speech four days after the incident, "There is no way a pilot could mistake this for anything other than a civilian airliner."

The article says that American intelligence subsequently found that a succession of Soviet errors had led to just such a miscalculation.

The article attributes the straying of the Korean airliner to mistakes in programming its inertial navigation system.

The device, which was installed in the 1970's, is reliable, but it can be mishandled. According to the article, American investigators sent to South Korea after the incident learned that three other K.A.L. flights, from Honolulu, Paris and Anchorage, had been aborted because of misprogrammings.

Quoting from a theory developed by Harold H. Ewing, an airline pilot, the article says the errors on the ill-fated airliner could have begun with mistaken coding of a single digit in the coordinates needed for navigation.

Captain Ewing's account, the article says, matches navigational details in secret United States Government studies of the plane's flight path. Captain Ewing, who has flown the route to test his hypothesis, did not have access to intelligence data.

As it happened, when the airliner first mistakenly entered Soviet airspace over the Kamchatka Peninsula, an American reconnaissance plane was in the area hoping to gather data on an expected Soviet missile launching.

The article says the reconnaissance flight was part of an intelligence program, in which refitted Boeing 707 planes, designated RC-135's, gather telemetry data from missiles while flying figure eights just outside Soviet airspace and on the edges of Soviet radar coverage.

On the night of Aug. 31, the Soviet missile launching was canceled and the American reconnaissance plane returned to its base, the article says.

Russians Reported a Linkage

Soviet officials have contended that the airliner and the reconnaissance plane flew side by side. But according to the article, the National Security Agency found no such evidence.

According to American analysts, the Soviet commander apparently first mistook the airliner for a reconnaissance flight that would be expected to remain outside Soviet airspace. For

this reason, the Russians waited several minutes to launch interceptors, too late to find the airliner as it crossed Soviet airspace over Kamchatka, the article says.

A complicating factor, monitored by the Americans, was that a Soviet radar post had initially given the interceptor pilots incorrect coordinates for pursuing the airliner.

There were different American explanations for the Russians' apparent belief that they were dealing with an American intelligence plane.

According to the article, officials of the National Security Agency told Congress in secret briefings that the Russians had tracked the RC-135 back to its base and had assumed that the airliner was part of another American program aimed at intercepting communications.

But the United States Air Force's Electronic Security Command, which is a military component of National Security Agency operations, contended that Soviet radar operators had been confused by the proximity of the RC-135 and believed they were tracking the same plane into Soviet airspace.

Soviet Radar Found Faulty

The article says Soviet radar is not effective in distinguishing sizes of planes. In some instances, Soviet forces have mistakenly attacked Soviet airliners, the article says. It adds that the United States appears to be keeping a better record of Soviet radar tracking than do the Russians themselves because the United States routinely videotapes intercepted Soviet radar information while the Russians rely on the memory of operators. The article says this may explain why the Soviet Union and United States differ on the flight path of the airliner at key points.

After having crossed Kamchatka without being challenged, the airliner reportedly was picked up again on

Soviet radar screens over the Sea of Okhotsk as it was heading toward Sakhalin Island, the site of military installations.

This time, Soviet fighters were able to get close, but in the dark, according to the article, they were still not certain about the identity of the plane they had under surveillance.

In fact, ground controllers asked a fighter pilot to activate an automatic system that would show whether the plane was Soviet. The Boeing 747 has a similar device identifying it as an airliner, but that device can be triggered only by ground stations.

A Call Is Placed to Moscow

It was during this pursuit over the Sea of Okhotsk that a deputy air defense commander in Khabarovsk tried to place a call to Moscow to reach Marshal Aleksandr I. Koldunov, commander in chief of Air Defense Forces, according to the article.

The officer in Khabarovsk tried three times to use scrambling equipment before giving up and speaking in the clear. As a result, a project of the National Security Agency to monitor the use of the Soviet scrambling equipment was able to pick up part of the conversation before the scrambler suddenly became effective.

American intelligence also was said to have intercepted a message from the deputy air defense commander in Khabarovsk reminding a Sakhalin air base of the rule requiring visual identification of an intruder before firing.

Soon afterward, a Soviet fighter pilot was told by the Sakhalin commanders to signal with cannon fire and, if this was unsuccessful, to attack the plane.

"Oh, my God!" ("Yolki palki!") exclaimed the pilot, the article says.

No visual identification had been made when the missiles flew and the pilot radioed back his now famous words: "The target is destroyed."

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